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Story, Discourse, and Anglo-American Philosophy of Action

Robert L. Caserio

In many literary narratives we find human action presented as an hypostatized entity, a thing in itself: “In the beginning was the Deed.” Such presentation converts action and action’s components into discrete objects; and thus, according to a tradition in Anglo-American philosophy of action, narrative fiction incorrectly tells us what actions are. Consciously or not, current narratology complements this philosophical tradition, and seems committed to making clear what action in fiction is by not reifying action, by not dissociating the action of a story from the discourse that orders, describes, and explains the action. If the narratologist tries to do otherwise, to assert the primacy in narrative of either word or deed, he does not succeed in escaping the alternative he tries to demote or reject. This is what Jonathan Culler tells us in “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative,” a chapter in his *The Pursuit of Signs*. In explaining a double logic inherent in all narrative, Culler reminds us that discourse fabricates events and actions in a story, as if the events were prior to their description, even though they are not prior. To be sure, Culler ends his chapter with a remark about the power of texts when the actions or events they portray seem to us to take precedence over the portrayal. But in spite of the remark, Culler emphasizes the dependence of action on discourse. I think the essay thereby suggests—with a double logic of its own—that we can, after all, assert the primacy of word over deed, since deeds may be illusory, whereas discourse is not.

The narratological enterprise seems to invert Hamlet’s worry over losing the name of action. Happy to retain just the name, narratology asserts the extra-linguistic and nameless entity to be only the fiction of fictions. The assertion is in keeping with the dominance of linguistics or semiotics in narrative theory, since these disciplines, as Paul Ricoeur says in *Time and Narrative*, Volume One, “reject as a postulate of their method the idea of an intention oriented toward the extralinguistic” (p. 78). No one has labored more against this rejection than Ricoeur, whose theory of narrative attempts to invoke “a prenarrative quality,” “action in quest of narrative,” above and prior to narrative itself (p. 74). As a powerful measure of what Ricoeur works against, we might look

to a direct theorizing of “action in quest of narrative” from a linguistic-semiotic perspective in Tzvetan Todorov’s “The Quest of Narrative” in *The Poetics of Prose*. In Todorov’s version (much earlier than Culler’s) of narrative’s double logic, the “narrative logic” of adventures—of “pure” action—is opposed to “ritual logic,” the logic of the *meaning* of the adventures. Todorov offers the conflict between these two logics as the essence of all narratives, but it is unclear what ontological status Todorov assigns to “adventures.” His essay makes “narrative logic” an emblem of the arbitrary Saussurean relation between signifiers and signifieds; in contrast, “ritual logic” is Cratylistic, and exemplifies motivated rather than arbitrary relations between the two halves of the sign. The double, conflicting logic of narrative thereby pits Saussurean ideas of language against pre-Saussurean ones—with the result that the place of action in narrative remains inscribed in modern linguistic and semiotic modes of thought. Without addressing itself to what actions or events are—to whether or not they can be hypostatized—Todorov’s argument remains under the rule of the science of signs, in the domain of discourse. But as Ricoeur always acknowledges, it is philosophy as well as linguistics and semiotics that puts obstacles in the way of any effort to orient narratological thought about actions and events toward the extralinguistic.

Like Ricoeur, I want to put us in mind of the orientation of narrative toward an extralinguistic action. Indeed, I want to sketch a justification of literary narrative’s hypostatizing of action. But I won’t do this by a direct exposition of Ricoeur. His exposition of “the fate of the event” in *Time and Narrative* is at once too fine and too comprehensive for use within my essay’s narrow limits; besides, Ricoeur’s exposition will not be concluded until the future appearance of the third volume of his study. So, in what I hope is the spirit if not the letter of Ricoeur’s thought, and at the risk of reaching conclusions he might not reach or endorse, I will align Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse* with the philosopher A. I. Melden’s *Free Action*, and will approach a reading of Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, to get at the character of action in Collins’ novel, which I take as representative of the genre. With this concrete example I hope to suggest the partial adequacy and the final inadequacy of the narratological and philosophical opposition to “action in quest of narrative.”

What is the adequate side of Melden’s and Chatman’s implicit alliance? Ricoeur’s “action in quest of narrative” is surely a way of thinking about “action as such.” But Melden opposes any such attempt, for it leads to thinking that not just actions but causes, motives and desires for action are knowable “as such.” Consequently, mistakenly, action becomes defined as a “movement plus a motive,” or as an effect “caused” by desire or motive, or as a happening which reason stands apart from. Melden argues that action is *accompanied* by desire, not *caused* by it. Where there is desire there is doing already, a “logical involvement of desire with doing” (p. 125). The same logical involvement holds for the relation of intelligence to action. “Rationality begins with the practical knowledge involved [to begin with] in doing” (p. 133). In so far as we are rational, we are practical, active creatures. “Only where there

is action can there be intelligence and wanting" (p. 134).

The theory of action turns out to be the theory of description. "To understand the concept of human action," Melden says, "we need to understand the *possibilities* of descriptions in social and moral terms" (p. 180). We know what human action is by describing it as a complex of components, no one of which has precedence in description. "Reference to [an act of] anger [for example] explains the action as that of an angry man—it enables us to describe *what he did*" (p. 205). The description would not license us to think of anger as a separate cause of a separate entity called an action. What goes for description applies equally to explanation. "Our task," Melden says, "is to explain not how [specific] actions are produced"—or what they are in themselves—"but rather how those same actions . . . can be more fully understood as the actions they are in fact" (p. 157). In explaining an action, we are making the action more clear, by enlarging and not hypostatizing or reifying the relevant descriptive terms. Action is our description and explanation of action. We do whatever we do in terms of an accompanying discourse, which is wedded to doing and not separable from or antagonistic to doing.

At first sight Chatman's *Story and Discourse* divides story and action from description and explanation, from discourse. With assertions like "discourse is not equivalent to story" (p. 54), Chatman seems to be admitting, at the least, narrative's double logic. "The what of narrative I call its 'story'; the way I call its discourse" (p. 9). Yet Chatman defines the what of content as "representations of objects and actions, . . . as filtered through the codes of the author's society" (p. 24). If the content is composed of codes, the what already is discourse. The logical involvement of action, description, and explanation makes the narratologist unable to tell his what from his way; and makes action seem only a fabricated other of discourse.

A product of this collapsed distinction is an unmasking of so-called omniscient narration. Omniscient or covert presentation, what Chatman calls nonnarrated discourse, turns out to be marked by signs of a narrative agent. Chatman's chapter, "Discourse: Nonnarrated Stories," includes discussion of interior monologue. The link between the latter and the "nonnarrated" story is not that both are "overheard" by the reader, but that both supposedly objective modes of telling are—appearances notwithstanding—pervaded by shaping subjective interest. A narrator's separateness from the action presented by his discourse is as feigned as the difference between action and discourse.

Consequently Chatman's focus on discourse as the fabric made by covert or overt interests or wills shows another logical identity—of action and discourse with fabrication, with how interest makes what is seen and done in a story. This again aligns Chatman with Melden, and makes the theory of action a theory of fabricating interests as well as of descriptions. Melden insists that will is no primitive entity either. "The question 'Voluntary or involuntary?'" Melden writes, "is never asked out of the blue, as it were, but only within the context of some interest we have in appraising the action" (p. 205). When we appraise will, we are appraising a synonym for will—

interest, our own as well as the actor's. This means we are all willful actors: for there is as logical an involvement between action and will or interest, as between deed and desire.

In light of what Chatman and Melden say, we might argue that mystery stories seek to correct our potential for error in thinking about action. An unsolved crime presents us with a deed as an inexplicable, hypostatized thing; and suggests that the deed is the fabrication of a unique, single criminal agent or interest. But a crime's solution dissolves the reified appearances surrounding the deed. The solution returns the deed to a network of descriptive-explanatory interests or fabrications—a network produced and shared by criminal, victim, and observers alike—in which the crime all along has inhered. *The Moonstone* can be read as a Meldenesque or Chatmanesque fable of the logical necessity of making action clear by wedding events with their descriptions and by exhibiting actions as networks of interest. The nuptials of Rachel Verinder and Franklin Blake are obstructed by an error shared by the novel's characters, all of whom reify the theft of the jewel by insisting that the theft is either unaccountable or is the effect of one agent's unique will.

To display—with philosophical and narratological correctness—the interidentity of action, discourse, and fabricating interest is arguably the point of Collins' assigning the novel's longest separate narrative to the Verinder's old servant, Gabriel Betteredge. Gabriel's narrative mission is to give a disinterested, "nonnarrated" account of the Moonstone case, insofar as Gabriel has been its supposedly passive spectator. But we can claim that Collins uses Gabriel to make clear the penetration of "nonnarrated" discourse by active interest. Gabriel turns out to be the fabricator—not in a lying sense, but in the sense of the maker—of what he seems merely to record. He thereby illustrates the way in which a gap between action and discourse is only an appearance. For example, since Gabriel talks Frank into presenting the moonstone to Rachel at her birthday party, Gabriel invests Frank with a relation to the jewel that motivates Frank's taking the jewel while he is sleep-walking. So Gabriel the passive observer is thereby an agent of the crime, as much as Frank or even as much as the alleged sole villain, Godfrey Ablewhite. But Gabriel is also an agent of the crime's solution. The solution begins with attention to an ex-thief and a family servant named Roseanna Spearman. It is Gabriel who is responsible for Roseanna's presence on the scene; a week before the crime, Gabriel intervenes with the family to keep Roseanna in the household. Twice, then, Gabriel the servant of the action fabricates the action. Collins' Meldenesque point, apparently, is that those who look on with interest, from no matter what distanced position, *make* what happens, by the logical involvement of action and interest.

In the novel's birthday party scene, especially in its presentation of the physician Dr. Candy, *The Moonstone*'s drama especially allies itself with Melden and Chatman. Another passive spectator of actions happening outside him, Dr. Candy might also illustrate the logical involvement of desire and doing. Interested in defending the honor of experimental medicine against Frank's

vociferous doubts, Dr. Candy secretly drugs Frank during Rachel's party, to prove a point about the power of the drug. And this of course makes Frank walk in his sleep. Like Gabriel, Dr. Candy too is an agent of the crime; his very interest in the scene simultaneously produces or fabricates the scene. What happens in the story, in the sense of action or event, can only be understood via a generalizing description that comprehends his interests no less than that of the more notable or prominent criminal agents. Indeed at Rachel's birthday party the ensemble of attendants are all agents of the story; indeed they *are* the story or the action. In characterizing events or actions, Ricoeur notes their essential singularity, their radical and unique contingency, their novelty in relation to what has already taken place (p. 226). But the birthday party scene suggests the character of action is not to be characterized in Ricoeur's way. What happens there is inextricable from a total network of discourse, one that does not emphasize unique agents and singular occurrences. What happens there and thereafter has *only the misleading appearance* of a split between actors and spectators, interest and disinterestedness, innovative novelty and convention, singularity of event and generalizing explanation and description.

But here I take leave of the philosophical-critical position I have tried to appreciate and have tried to show that *The Moonstone* illustrates. A philosopher like Melden, a narratologist like Chatman, are right about the relation of action and discourse up to a point. Beyond that point is the element of power in a literary text—the power that most moves us, even if it ensnares us in philosophical or logical error. As Culler remarks, the element of power in a narrative text may submit any wedding of formal elements, say story joined with discourse, to a dynamic disjoining. Suppose it is always this disjunction that draws us back to narrative; and suppose further that this disjunction is not the mark of an insoluble double bind. *The Moonstone* makes these further suppositions, going beyond what it "teaches" through Gabriel and Dr. Candy, in a powerful anti-narratological and anti-philosophical direction. What does *this* direction tell us about action?

From first to last *The Moonstone* remains a suspense novel. It may look as if the wedding of Rachel and Blake resolves the suspense, as if the couple in their union stand for a re-union of the suspended relations of action and discourse, nefariously interrupted by the crime, and by Godfrey's desire to keep his action inaccessible to description and explanation. But the wedding is a false finale. The novel's true finale again suspends the wedding of discourse and action, the logical couplings and involvements of desire and doing. *The Moonstone* has an anti-philosophical, anti-narratological complicity with Godfrey Ablewhite, though Collins uses two shady characters other than Godfrey to show how, after all, there is a radical break between action and description or explanation. Our favored philosophical-narratological assertions are mocked by the characters and the shady cases of Roseanna and of her structural double, Ezra Jennings, the mysterious doctor's assistant whose research into the unconscious finally explains Blake's theft. In the novel's first third

Roseanna desires Blake; of course her desire and her doing something to achieve her desire are simultaneous. But the illogic with which her desire and deed develop shows us the turning of action against its components. Hoping to win Blake's love from Rachel, and wanting to bury the evidence of Blake's role in the crime, Roseanna's "intentions" and "interests" achieve her suicide by drowning, the coming to light of Jennings' researches, the exoneration of Blake, and his wedding to Rachel. If Roseanna had not buried the damning evidence to begin with, it turns out, Blake would have been convicted. But that Roseanna's actions achieve the saving of Blake in this inconsequentially consequential way is a mystery indeed. Making no common sense, the mystery overwhelms the discourse with a creative illogic. This creative illogic, which suspends the interests of agents, marks what Ricoeur calls the autonomizing of action, is his essay, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text."

The autonomizing of action is perhaps the origin of every narrative suspense. When narratology draws its story-discourse of *fabula-suzhet* distinction, it assigns suspense to the discourse or *suzhet*, to the way description or explanation forms the acts of the *fabula* so as to give them the effect of being in suspense. But this assignment overlooks action itself as the essence of suspense. Suspense inheres in the *fabula* itself, no matter if narratology refuses to locate suspense there. There are a number of ways in *The Moonstone* of explaining Roseanna's path to suicide, but even the best—lawyer Bruff's reconstruction of what Roseanna did, and why—shows the powerlessness of description and explanation as they confront the autonomy of deeds. And it is this very autonomy which in the end saves Blake, and dominates the wedding engendered by it. "The conduct pursued, under a sudden emergency, by a young girl, supplies the foundation on which I have built this book." Thus Collins concludes the first paragraph of his preface, with a reference that economically directs us both to Rachel and Roseanna. The latter's blindly saving actions on Blake's behalf, also pursued "under a sudden emergency," is first a stubborn silence about what Roseanna has found and seen in the way of evidence incriminating to Blake, then the suicide that extends the silence for a year. Before the discovery of Roseanna's suicide letter, the silence of the year that passes after her death is itself a salvation to Blake: it gives him time to collect other witnesses, and to return to the neighborhood of Dr. Candy and his all-important assistant Jennings; it gives time for the real thief to redeem the loan for which he has given the diamond as a security. Without this silence, without the autonomizing of her act of suicide, Roseanna's evidence—had it been revealed at once—would have merely damned Blake. And the same is true for Rachel's silence: *that* young girl, had she spoken at once about what she saw, would have condemned her lover. For—echoing Roseanna—Rachel chooses to seal herself in wilful blindfolding to the sight of her lover taking the jewel. A description is to arrive, in the course of time, that will justify Rachel's choice of blindness and silence; but only the stubborn action of discourse-opposing silence makes it possible for the suitably

explanatory terms of the discourse to arrive. Here again the discourse seems to be creatively mastered by actions which take on an independent life of their own, suspending and subordinating the relevance and importance of description and explanation.

Once Roseanna is dead, her place in the novel is taken by Jennings, who is Collins' emblem of another important aspect of the mystery of action, with its power to hold discourse in suspense. In its autonomy action is analogous to "nonnarrated" presence, a presence not fabricated by an intending agent. As such, action is a thing with no name; anonymous, because it cannot be designated the property of a producer; nameless too in a large sense, insofar as the action resists encompassing by the nominations of description or explanation.

Representative of the anonymity of action, Ezra Jennings' life is situated by Collins in a mystery equal to the effects of Roseanna's suicide. There is a discourse that will come to terms with Blake's and Rachel's story, but no discourse for the story of Jennings. He will not tell "his story" to any man, in fact; he insists "it will die with me." This is because, Collins tells us, the possibilities of description fail him. Any description or explanation would flatter the accusation of crime which dogs Jennings; in his case, applied to his life, *discourse* is error, because it always tells against him. In the "Third Narrative," ch. 9, Jennings says, "I have mentioned an accusation which has rested on me for years . . . I am incapable, perfectly incapable of proving my innocence. I can only assert my innocence." Yet while the absence of a justifying explanation or description victimizes Jennings, he refuses to be rescued from his predicament. On his deathbed, Dr. Candy reports in the "Seventh Narrative," Jennings "said—not bitterly—that he would die as he had lived, forgotten and unknown. He maintained that resolution to the last. There is no hope now of making any discoveries concerning him. His story is a blank." Jennings wills more of this blankness by directing his letters, diary and unfinished book on the links between conscious and unconscious thought to be buried with him. He insists "no monument of any sort—not even the commonest tombstone— . . . mark the place of my burial." He wants to rest "unknown," to sleep "nameless."

Of course Jennings is known by the "monument" that is his effect on Blake and Rachel—their marriage. But *The Moonstone* implies that although this or that effect of action may be identified or described, there is also an autonomous, nameless potential in any action which must be understood as the action's essence, at once too powerful and too fragile to be matched by discourse. Now the Melden-esque philosopher would call this reading of action out of Collins' example error, fiction indeed. Even the philosophers of action who disagree with Melden would feel uncomfortable. Arthur C. Danto might feel the least uncomfortable, for reasons I shall touch on; but on the basis in his early and now classic essay "Basic Action," Danto argues that basic action may not be explicable or even intelligible, but is basic because it is not mysterious. Donald Davidson undoes Melden's involvement of ac-

tion, cause, and interest, but while Davidson's essay on "Eternal vs. Ephemeral Events" disjoins particular events and their descriptions, I doubt if Davidson any more than the Danto of "Basic Action" would supplement the disjunction by speaking of ephemeral events as mysteriously creative. And John Searle, in the recent *Minds, Brains, and Science* argues that we must describe what agents do in terms of their preferred descriptions of those actions. This returns discussion of action to the closest possible fit—if not to the logical involvement—of actions, interests, and descriptions.

Like the philosophers, most narratologists would call my reading of Collins' exemplary definition of action fiction. Of course narratology would speak here of inescapable supreme fiction, yet I don't think this is what Collins has in mind. The novel implies what Ricoeur would call an ontological vehemence in the break between action and discourse, between the "(as yet) untold story" and the secondary process of narrating it. In a handbook of narratology more rigorous and coherent than Chatman's, Mieke Bal's recently translated *Narratology*, Bal identifies fabula with "a series of logically and chronologically related events" (p. 5). But one wants to say, from the perspective of *The Moonstone*, that "logical relations" belong to the discourse. If the fabula is the realm of the action, it is the realm of inchoate blankness, autonomous of "relations" even though it may be available to them. To speak of the inchoate nature of action is not to say that action is desire, however, as in the Peter Brooks version. In his use of Freud in *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks stays close to the logical involvement of desire and doing, and matches action and narrative with our interest, our will both to make and to unmake discourse.

How strange Ricoeur should know Anglo-American philosophy, Freud, semiotics and linguistics, and should nevertheless speak of the ontological vehemence of action and narration both! Recently, in "Action, Story and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition*" Ricoeur has pointed to an ally in Hannah Arendt's thought about human action. A citation of her, and one further note about Danto, will conclude my indirect evocation of Ricoeur. Wilkie Collins insists on the intransigence of Jennings' refusal to make something of his life. It is as if Collins in this way is saying that all story-makers like himself must not identify with what they make. The author makes the story's discourse, but not that which is different from the discourse, the action. And the story's stuff is an action with such complex and delicate filaments that there is no telling it as a chronological and logical relation, and there is no telling who has made it. *Action* is not an invention. In *The Human Condition* Arendt puts this idea about action thus:

Because of [the] already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions . . . action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that [the medium] "produces" stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories

may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. [The stories] themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications. . . . The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was “made up” and the former not made at all.

Now here it is of political interest that Arendt thinks of narratives as reifications, and thinks of actions “as such” as not reifications—thereby inverting the philosopher’s suspicions! Arendt’s analysis of action stems from her simultaneous critical revision of Marx and of her continued attachment to him. In her argument the mystery of actions results from the way she thinks we cannot grasp actions and their results with any of the security with which we can grasp the process and the products of fabrication. The autonomization of action ensures that action will exceed our intellectual, moral, and material grasp on it; whereas the fabrication process is what we can get—and keep—a hold on. So for Arendt, and for Ricoeur’s alliance with Arendt, the combined autonomy and intangibility of actions leads to a story-discourse model whose political bearing is, so to speak, a generalized generosity. If actions lose their names, if deeds escape even their most responsible intentions, our response to them might well have to be, repeatedly, forebearance, even forgiveness—admissions, in sum, of our inability to grasp what we do. This generosity suggests an interwoven political, moral, and narrative economy, humbling all attempts at grasp, whether the attempts derive from the interests of money, or from the manipulative interests of ideology and rhetoric.

What, then, if the “made up” story should assert a domain or a possibility of action which is “not made at all”? Our prevailing narratology would be blind to the assertion’s success. In showing how a narrator only *appears* to be covert, only *appears* to be different from what he fabricates; in being unable to break through the sense of an undecidable double bind in the relations of word and deed, narratology makes the interest of the fabricator the center of all attention. Perhaps this is inevitable, when one is considering the realm of art, of fabrication. Yet even what is fabricated may want to meditate on what is not—and may want to open a space of appearance wherein what is not fabricated comes into view. Instead of assigning the “nonnarrated” element in a text to one or another code of discourse, we might claim the contradictions of point of view, interest, and intervention in a literary discourse to be the complements of the mystery of events. The uncertainty of omniscience in narration reflects the uncertainty of all conscious making, insofar as the latter is dependent on the autonomy and anonymity of action over which fabrication and discourse have no control.

For a philosophical last word on these matters, I return to Danto, who I suggest might instance a turning-point in Anglo-American philosophy of action. Danto’s work appears to have changed since “Basic Action”—or so it seems on the basis of the new chapters added to the recent re-issue of Danto’s *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1961-64) under the name of *Narration and*

Knowledge. The current title derives from the new last chapter, in which Danto defines historical narrative as the product of what he calls a “cognitive assymetry” (p. 351) between actions or events and the discourse which describes them. Actions are assymetrical to their cognition because actions have an unknown future; they call—or quest—for understanding by a later action and a later time, by a later perspective. The response to this quest is story-telling, in which the mysteries of multiple actions and their effects are seen in relation to each other, across time. But these relations are not identical with chronology or logic. As Danto says, if these relations which compose the narrator-historian’s knowledge “were made available to the characters [he writes about], the structure of narration would be destroyed. The knowledge available to the historian is logically outside the . . . events he describes” (p. 356). The possibility of story-telling is that there be this outside, in the conditions of time; and I notice that logic here for Danto is not that of a double bind, but is the logic—if one *can* call it that—of being in time. As I interpret Danto’s argument, I hear Danto—just as I hear Ricoeur in *his* work—saying that the life of action is action’s quest for narration just by virtue of action’s maintaining its essential difference from narration, and its hierarchical ascendancy over narration. This difference and this hierarchy entail risks narratology would rather not take; the risks include thinking (at least sometimes) in essentialist terms, and giving a kind of ontological privilege to some terms rather than others.

Such risks are currently taboo. Those who subscribe to the taboo might note that the dualism and the hierarchy in which I frame action here—rightly or wrongly taking my lead from Collins, from Arendt, Ricoeur, and Danto—need not be the whole story of action. After all, it is not that action is never matched or wedded with discourse; it is not that the match is never creative. But on the other hand, it might be high time again to think about more than the *possibility* that action is different from discourse. What if we think about that difference as a fact? For better or worse such thought might well verge on paradox and mystery, because it might be paradox and mystery in which our actions ensnare us (more than we ever know), and to which our stories always return.

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